

Public Hearing on HB 6380

Members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to come before you today. I am the current supervisor of the Children's Services Division at BESB, having been with the agency for over 20 years. I am here to voice my opposition to Bill 6380. Under the governor's plan, BESB will no longer exist, and the funding and staff for the divisions will move to other agencies. Given our budget crisis, I understand the need to reduce costs. The governor has indicated that his plan will result in savings without hurting services. I believe that this bill is a well-intentioned effort to accomplish that goal, but I also believe that by separating Children's Services from the other divisions, there will be unintended negative consequences, lost services, and little savings.

For over a century, BESB has served as a safety net for CT residents who are blind. In sending services to different agencies, the end result is tearing that safety net in half. It is unrealistic to believe that no one will fall through the crack when those searching for support for a blind child will need to go to one agency and those searching for support for an adult are directed to another agency. BESB is a small agency whose name clearly identifies its function. By burying these critical services within two larger agencies, I believe that some blind individuals will not receive the services they need and deserve—either because they can't find the services, don't realize they even exist, or because they become frustrated trying to connect with the right person within a mega agency. BESB is small enough that no matter who receives a call from the public, they know how to direct that call. There is no getting lost in a loop. This is critically important for an individual who has just lost their vision or a parent whose child has just been diagnosed with blindness.

My second concern is the lack of real cost savings in separating the divisions. The agency efficiently uses many shared resources—space, equipment, and personnel. BESB staff graciously relinquish the staff cafeteria when CS needs it to conduct our popular annual in-service training programs for district personnel, or when we are conducting group training for students on all aspects of independent living. We share costly equipment in both the assistive technology lab and the Low Vision Center. Our staff support one another across divisions, cooperating on inter-divisional projects and collaborating on transition age students. Keeping all the divisions together under one roof would eliminate this problem. If you need cost savings, give us a chance to find them in a manner that does not disrupt the successful BESB model.

I appreciate that the governor valued the services provided by the Children's Services professional staff, and has proposed maintaining the funding and the personnel as we move to SDE. This brings me to my last and most serious concern. The direct services provided by BESB teachers are not in keeping with the SDE model. Bill 6380 only guarantees that CS funding and personnel will carry over on July 1, 2011. However, it seems highly unlikely that these services will be maintained over the course of time. Can you assure the parents of the blind children we serve that the Commissioner of Education will maintain these services in their present form? It seems far more likely that services will eventually be eliminated and the responsibility turned back to the towns. The towns, in turn, will struggle to hire and maintain qualified teachers and mobility specialists for this low incidence population. This has been proven time and again not to be cost-effective in smaller towns where numbers of students fluctuate from year to year. In states where districts provide their own services, vacancies often exist for months at a time—children who are blind go without the critical services they need to fully access the curriculum. In the hands of an agency with a much larger focus, will services for children who are blind be the same priority as they were under BESB? I don't believe they will.

Thank you for your time.

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